



Opinions as Report Cards? Patients Rating Physicians Online

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Background

Health services, by their nature, are difficult to evaluate. As a solution, public reporting of hospital outcomes and physicians has been proposed to go beyond measuring patient satisfaction. Such report cards inform the public about the performance of physicians and are supposed to guide decisions of patients.

From the US, mixed results were reported on the implementation and use of report cards. On the one hand, providers were incentivized to perform better, on the other hand, they used cream-skimming to increase their rated performance.

In the meantime patients can rate their physician in web portals. Physicians are perturbed by this development, as the anonymity of the internet enables patients to give bad ratings without having to state who they are.

Objective

To review the experience of English-speaking countries in the online reporting by patients.

Methods

A convenience sample of four free-of-charge websites was evaluated on the criteria of the HON Code of Conduct for Medical and Health Websites (Lunt and Carrera 2011), which were adjusted to the evaluation of rating websites.

The HonCode

- Indicates the qualifications of authors.
- Information is complementary and supportive, and does not replace the doctor-patient relationship.
- Privacy; respects the privacy and confidentiality of personal data submitted to the site.
- Cites the source(s) of published information, date and medical and health pages.
- Site backs up claims relating to benefits and performance.
- Transparency; accessibility of presentation, accuracy of e-mail contact.
- Financial disclosure; identifies funding sources
- Advertising policy; clearly distinguishes advertising from editorial content.

Results

None of the websites evaluated met all criteria of the HonCode. Whereas all websites met the criteria “indication of the qualifications of authors” and “privacy”, the criteria met the least are “citing sources”, “transparency”, and “financial disclosure”.

Each site provided information about the company, but most did not disclose the sources of funds and the nature of their operation. None clearly provided an e-mail address throughout the website, and two did not provide any e-mail address.

The majority of reviews on the website were positive. However, the (potential for) misuse or abuse is evident.

Websites evaluated

Website	Geographic reach	Criteria used for the ratings
RateMDs	International	Punctuality, helpfulness, knowledge
Checkbook (Patient Central)	Parts of the US	Timeliness, communication, staff, recommendability
DrScore	US	Exam, timeliness, treatment, staff
iWantGreatCare	UK	Trusting, listening, recommendability

Conclusion

- None of the evaluated physician rating websites scored well on the categories of the HonCode.
- The possibility of misuse underpins the concerns of physicians with regards to the intended and unintended consequences of online reporting.
- Still, the websites are valuable in cases of information asymmetry and of very multi-faceted quality of care.
- Patient-rating of their physicians alone will not be successful when patients do not change their behaviour on the basis of the results.
- The impact of rating websites on total welfare will depend on their signalling effects and on the impact of negative ratings.

